

holding hands in the dark by lonelyghosts

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Summary:

Mike is thirteen, and there's a girl in her basement.

holding hands in the dark

Author's Note:

- For [OpheliaMarina](#).

anyways i love my trans daughter mike wheeler and
her nb girlfriend eleven

this is dedicated to my favorite person, trixie, gay
communist

Mike is thirteen, and she's still afraid of the dark.

Her mom says that she's too old for nightlights, that she's too old for a lot of things. Mike's dad doesn't say much, but what he does say cuts to the bone. Words like- words like *fag* and *queer* and *sissy*. The words are all in good fun, all jokes, but they still hurt.

Mike has a secret, and it is burrowed deep into her heart, and she won't admit it to herself. Her parents don't know. The kids at school suspect, because it's the kind of secret that tints Mike's cheeks when she speaks, sometimes, but they don't know, not really.

Her secrets belong to her alone. It makes her ashamed, dirty, frightened of herself, but the secrets belong to her. Nancy knows the truth- at least, she knows bits and pieces of something resembling it. Sometimes, when Nancy's bubbly with lack of sleep and caffeine, she and Barb will pull Mike into their room and dust her face with blushes and powders, tangle Mike's hair into knots, and Mike is both ashamed and happy at once.

Lucas and Dustin suspect, but they don't say a word about it, just avert their eyes every time that bits of it show. But Will- Will knows the truth, from a whispered sleepover in third grade that Mike doesn't remember. Will knows, and Will looks at Mike sometimes and says softly, I get it, and Mike thinks he might. Not the exact thing, but something close to it.

Then Will goes missing, and there's a girl dressed in a yellow shirt in

the rain, and something, *something* changes.

Mike is thirteen, and there's a girl in her basement, one with scraped palms and a shaved head and big, doe eyes. There are bad men following her and there are secrets in every corner of her body. Something's gone wrong. And Will is gone, Will is *dead*, and everything is different.

Lucas and Dustin are murmuring tearily to themselves, all shock and fear and wonder and grief, which is worst of all. Mike chimes in every so often, but her heart isn't in it. All she can think about is Will, blue-eyed and shaking, alone in the woods at night, in some strange version of Hell or whatever is left after you die.

Mike is scared. Mike thinks deep within her, in the part of her that she won't acknowledge, the part where she stores everything deep and wrong and awful about her, the part that flinches every time that her mother calls her Michael, that maybe Will is in a place not so different from the inside of Mike's head.

Eleven looks at her softly after Lucas and Dustin leave and says, "Tell me a story, Mike."

So Mike does. Mike tells Eleven a story about a lost knight with a curse and a thousand secrets and regret, who wandered for ten years in the dark, pursued by monsters, before she was taken in by a proud princess with a gifted tongue who waged war on their enemies, about a wizard lying dead in the lake holding a sword. It's a good story, and it aches. It's a raw story, pulled out of Mike with everything she has.

After the story Eleven points at herself and says, "Knight."

Mike shifts, uncomfortable. "Yeah, I guess."

Eleven's eyes are full of sorrow and understanding when she reaches out and touches Mike's chest and says, "Princess."

Mike flushes a flaming red, her cheeks hot with shame, shocked into silence, and she's trapped, ashamed, exposed and vulnerable because Eleven's right, what she's saying is true, somehow, and wrong in some

mysterious way that Mike can't put words to-

"Secret," Eleven murmurs, and puts a finger to her lips. "Secret."

"Yeah," Mike says, shakily. "Secret."

Mike's thirteen. There's a girl next to her in a shining blonde wig that has to itch on Eleven's bare scalp. She's wearing the pink dress that Mike once wore at three AM at Barb's enthusiastic urging, feeling both wrong and right at once, as if she'd stumbled into the wrong world on accident.

Every time that Mike looks at Eleven, her heart wrenches, because here they are, both somehow wrong, equally uncomfortable in their own skins.

Eleven says things like, "Promise, friend, pretty," but she means something else, something Mike is afraid of deciphering. Mike looks at her and is inwardly, inexplicably disgusted at her own damn self.

It's supposed to be different. She knows that. It's supposed to be normal, and okay, and good. Mike isn't supposed to be ashamed with herself because of the way that her heart swells when El smiles at her. This is natural. This is normal. Mike's dad has told her all about it. Boys are supposed to get crushes on girls, they're supposed to feel like this. It's perfectly normal and fine.

Saying that doesn't make her feel any less dirty. It just makes her feel worse.

Mike is thirteen at her best friend's funeral.

Mr Clarke is talking about parallel universes. About the theory of the multiverse. He tells them, "There's a universe where none of this tragedy ever happened," and Mike thinks in an instant of a thousand beautiful and unreachable parallel universes happier than this one-one where Will is safe, one where her parents love each other, one where Eleven is just the slightly intimidating soft-hearted girl next door, one where Mike's body fits her, one where the world is kinder-

But none of those universes are real. Even if they are, Mike can't get them. She's stuck here, in the middle of a tragedy, in a world that doesn't care, in the middle of a body that hates her, and nothing is alright.

Mike is thirteen, and Eleven is lying on her back in the gravel, blood trickling down her face as she sobs gently and says, "The gate. I opened it. I'm the monster, Mike. I'm the monster."

She looks like anything but a monster. She looks like the only good thing Mike's ever done, the only good thing she has left to protect. Will is stuck somewhere, wasting away, and Lucas hates her, but Eleven- Eleven is okay, and that's more than enough for Mike right now.

"No, El, you're not the monster," Mike says, and smiles as tears well up in her eyes.

Mike is thirteen and Eleven is somewhere around the same age, and they're standing together in the bathroom as Eleven's nose drips blood into the sink. The flow is finally starting to slow down after a solid half hour. As Mike watches, a droplet swells slowly at the edge of Eleven's nose before slipping down to stain the edge of Eleven's mouth.

Eleven's eyes are teary when she asks Mike, "Still pretty?"

"Yeah," Mike breathes, "still pretty." In the mirror, their eyes meet.

Eleven turns to face her and one hand comes up to cup Mike's face. Suddenly this is more intimate than anything Mike has ever done, the two of them standing there in the well-lit bathroom, an inch between them and a hand on Mike's face, the way that Eleven is looking at Mike like she's something precious. Her breath catches in her throat like a wish, like the last vestiges of a prayer.

Like a promise.

"Pretty," Eleven smiles, her hand on Mike's face and it hits her, that

Eleven thinks she's pretty, and her cheeks are reddening and tears are pricking at the edge of Mike's vision as she leans forward, and for a moment, one perfect moment, their lips brush-

The door slams open and Mike jumps back so fast that she slips on the tile and lands on her ass in the bathtub.

"C'mon, guys," Dustin barks, with uncharacteristic authority. "Let's go!"

Mike has never hated Dustin more in all her life.

Mike is thirteen and they're both in the cafeteria when Eleven asks, "And you'd be my brother?"

Mike's brow furrows at the thought. She's confused by it, because everything about that is wrong, it's out of place, in a way that she can't explain-

"Sorry," Eleven says, interrupting Mike's train of thought. "I'd... I'd be your sibling? Is that... is that right?"

She shakes her head and says, "No, no," because there's still something wrong about that, but it's better than before, and El looks-relieved, somehow.

Less than five minutes later, Mike kisses her and everything fits, suddenly, into place. Something clicks deep inside of Mike's heart and spreads throughout her body till she tingles all over, and Mike thinks, *oh*.

Oh.

She realizes at once why the word *boy* fits poorly in her mouth, why she is jealous of her older sister despite everything. Why her heart lights up when she sees El, why the word *brother* feels like something wrong, why the name Michael makes her flinch. Why she felt so strangely when Barb and Nancy used to dress her up in their old costumes. Why her stomach had fluttered when Eleven had called her pretty.

It's liberating to finally realize- she's a girl, and she's in love with El.

Less than five minutes later, the bad men come, and everything falls apart.

Mike's thirteen and she's kicking, screaming, tearing at the arms of the soldier that is holding her back, and Eleven is bleeding on the ground as a man crouches over her, crooning into her ear in a perversion of comfort.

As if he *cares*. As if he doesn't see Eleven as a tool, as if he hasn't hurt her and written down notes while nodding contemplatively. As if he doesn't think of her as an object, a pet, something to be wielded-

"Papa," Eleven coughs out. Mike's heart lights up like a Christmas tree and plunges into darkness at once, because El is *alive*, she's not dying, she's okay, they can save her, but she's in the arms of Dr. Brenner, the worst of the worst, the man who's name Eleven cries out in her dreams, sobbing, pleading. This is the man that Mike would kill without hesitation. In a heartbeat.

"Bad," Eleven whispers, the word accompanied by a gush of blood that spills from her nose and stains Nancy's borrowed dress. She tries to pull away, but Brenner's grip is strong and she is still too weak to move, and she only manages to turn away, hand hovering in the air as she reaches out, one arm extended in Mike's direction.

"Mike," she whimpers. "Mike-"

White-hot rage floods her bones, and Mike throws herself against the soldier's arms with renewed strength, gritting her teeth, and then she hears it.

Thudding shakes the whole room as she looks across the hallway. Bits of stone crumble from the wall and hit the ground.

"The blood," Mike breathes.

As if on cue, the demogorgon bursts through the wall. The soldiers' hands go to their guns, and Mike uses the opportunity to break free, sliding across the floor to scoop up Eleven in her arms and then-

Then she *runs*.

Mike is thirteen and she's holding Eleven in her arms on the surface of a science lab table, and she is still hopeful, despite everything, that they will survive this, she's still hoping that somehow, someway, they'll manage to survive.

Even though she knows, deep down, they won't.

"We'll get you your own bed for the basement- or you can take my room if you want, I'm down in the basement all the time anyways- and my mom," Mike's voice cracks, fuck, she's crying, *fuck*, "she can make you Eggos whenever you want."

A tear slides down her cheek and lands next to Eleven's head. Mike tries to swallow but finds she can't. She can't breathe. God, they'll get through this, they have to get through this together-

"And, and we can go to the Snow Ball."

"Promise?" Eleven asks, voice faint, her eyes cloudy as she looks up at Mike, and the tears fall faster now. Mike doesn't bother trying to hide it.

She squeezes Eleven's hand. "I promise."

Mike is thirteen, and it's not supposed to end like this.

Eleven turns back a moment as she looks up at her from the ground. She's covered in dirt and blood, both fresh and dried, and there are purpling bags underneath her eyes from tiredness. She looks like she'll collapse at any moment.

Mike has never seen anyone more beautiful in her entire life.

No, she tries to say, but the words don't come. There is cotton in her mouth and salt on her cheeks. It's not supposed to end like this.

Less than an hour ago, Mike was kissing Eleven in the middle school cafeteria and laughing when Dustin brought out the chocolate

pudding. Less than an hour ago, they were making plans to go to the Snow Ball. Less than an hour ago, everything was okay.

"Goodbye, Mike," El says, and reaches out, and god, no, there are so many things that Mike hasn't said yet, like, *you are so beautiful*, and, *I love you*, and, *when I'm around you I don't hate myself*, and, *you were the thing I was looking for*, *I missed you before I knew you* and *I love you I love you I love you*-

They dissolve in a pile of ash, and just like that, it's over.

Mike is thirteen. The girl that she's in love with is gone. Her best friend is in a coma. Everything is over.

It's been a week since Will disappeared. Somehow, it feels like it's been longer.

She goes home. There are questions, as she knew there would be, and she answers them, and she rages internally, and for a second she thinks she sees Eleven in the window but she's not there, she isn't, because it's over, this is the end-

It's only later, when the bad men leave, when Mike's mother stops trying to get her to tell her what happened, when her father has stopped scolding her with an air of self-righteousness, when she is allowed to go upstairs to bed, as the sun rises above the horizon and the analog clock reads 4:12 in red, that Mike lets herself cry.